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ABSTRACT

Research of the lives of almost unknown women such as Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673) provides valuable perspectives on contemporary problems affecting women and establishes a tradition of female development and community. Cavendish published 14 volumes of poetry, prose fiction, plays, and a biography of her husband plus five volumes of natural philosophy between 1653 and 1668. Because she rarely found the support of other women, she created fantasies of utopias in which women could become scholars, architects, generals, rulers, and scientists. She suggested that marriage undermines the psychological independence necessary for achievement. In her study of science, her lack of formal education freed her from the limitations of her male contemporaries. Although no one has taken her scientific work seriously, her premise of a rational, self-moving matter is more compatible with modern concepts of matter than the ideas of her contemporaries. Finally, Cavendish's writings reveal the psychological price paid by women who sought intellectual distinction in societies that regarded such activity as unwomanly. (Author/KC)

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Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673) and the Uses of Women's History

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Presented at The Women's Studies Challenge to Tradition Symposium, May 1978

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MARGARET CAVENDISH, DUCHESS OF NEWCASTLE (1623-1673) AND THE USES OF WOMEN'S HISTORY

Though some people may wonder why a scholar would devote time and energy investigating the lives and work of almost unknown women of the past, this kind of research will eventually provide us with a comprehensive account of women's participation in society--economically, politically, intellectually, and artistically. Such a recovery of women's history will yield two major benefits. First, it will give us valuable perspectives on contemporary problems affecting women and thus we will better understand the present. Secondly, it will establish a tradition of female development and community that can be immensely supportive for women today in our efforts to develop individual potential, to extend the sphere of women's activities in our culture, and to receive recognition and just reward. To give but one general example, since literary history currently treats all but a few women writers as minor, peripheral, or flawed figures, the aspiring woman writer takes male authors as her models, yet the problematics involved both in writing by men and in their struggle to write may be quite different from those which issue from feminine experience: the relationship of male writer to female muse, for instance, does not appear to be reversible.[1] But the feminist literary history now emerging seems to be discovering a dynasty of "seminal mothers" that may make matters quite different for young women writers today and in the future by releasing them from the ~~tensions of~~ difficulties created by inappropriate models.

I should like to discuss the effects of the lack of such a feminine tradition in the case of Margaret Cavendish and to show a few of the ways in which she is the first major feminine voice in English writing, a sisterly voice from the past whose reflections on the role and nature of women show us that feminist inquiry indeed has a history. But first a brief summary of her career.[2]

Born probably in 1623 to a respected English gentry family, she had a secluded but permissive upbringing which, however, included none of the formal education her brothers received. In 1643 she became lady-in-waiting to Queen Henrietta Maria, who seems to have been a heroine figure for her; she attended her through a harrowing escape from Oxford, a difficult childbirth, and exile into France. Among the sophisticated courtiers this decorous and bookish young woman felt very much a fish out of water,[3] but she became the object of much envy when she was courted by the gallant Marquis of Newcastle, recently widowed and thirty years her elder, who embodied the Renaissance ideal of the cultured gentlemen and was at the time a great Royalist hero. They were married in 1645, and within two years settled in Antwerp, remaining there until the Restoration in 1660 when they returned to his vast estates in Derbyshire. They had no children, though he had several by his first wife. ~~Though~~ While he was a sociable person with a wide circle of friends among poets, philosophers, and scientists, she seems to have been almost morbidly shy except in quite intimate circles. Lady Margaret died in 1673, predeceasing her husband by three years.

Between 1653 and 1668 Margaret Cavendish published fourteen volumes, nearly 5000 pages, consisting of poetry, prose fiction, twenty plays, miscellaneous prose on a variety of subjects, a biography of her husband, a short autobiographical memoir, and five substantial volumes on natural philosophy.[4] This is an astonishing output in quantity as well as in variety of form and subject matter, remarkable also, in my opinion, for its quality. She had all her work printed, very handsomely too, sending copies to the universities in England. That such activity was extraordinary for a woman she was all too aware. In a preface addressed to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge she remarks how badly her works have been received but expresses

the hope that she will find more civility in the universities. She meant only that they would accept her books quietly and without censure, to be buried in their stacks. But she adds, "and who knows but that after my honourable burial, I may have a glorious resurrection in the following ages, since time brings strange and unusual things to pass, I mean unusual to men though not in nature; and I hope this action of mine is not unnatural, though unusual for a woman to present a book to the University" (Poems and Fancies, 1664).

In her own time she was called Mad Madge, the object of much contempt and criticism. This reputation as an eccentric freak contributed to her own doubts about her ambitions, and as a result her many prefaces to readers are laced with apologies and justifications. She addresses a preface to her first book to her women readers: "Condemne me not as a dishonour of your Sex, for setting forth this Work," and in a second preface she justifies her work by explaining, "I have no Children to imploy my care and Attendance on; and my Lords Estate being taken away, had nothing for huswifery." In another she observes, "I know that some regard me not as a right begotten daughter of Nature, but a monster produced by her escapes or defects." In her husband's detailed defense against charges that she hired a scholar to write her books for her, he concluded, "But here's the crime, a Lady writes them, and to intrench so much upon the male prerogative is not to be forgiven" (Poems and Fancies, 1663). Nonetheless, she continued to publish, and sometimes became humorously defiant about her writing: "I know my Books neither wise nor witty, nor methodical, but various and extravagant" ~~but ends~~ and concludes "I am as I am." Protected by rank, wealth, and a supportive husband, Margaret Cavendish persevered, but these prefaces poignantly reveal the tremendous psychological price paid by women who sought intellectual distinction in societies that regarded such activities as unwomanly.

Margaret Cavendish searched history for women who had devoted themselves to the arts or sciences: she wanted to feel that she was not a solitary female freak. But she found none in the past, though she undoubtedly knew of the contemporary examples of Anna van Schurman and Madeleine de Scudéry, and in one essay she concludes that because of the total absence of feminine accomplishment perhaps women really were inferior.[5] The notion of a sympathetic sisterhood appealed greatly to Margaret Cavendish: she longed for the support of other women, but rarely found it. In her plays, all of which portray young women in conflict with traditional roles, older women nearly always disapprove of these restless, discontented "witty virgins," urging them to settle down and accept their lot in life gracefully. One play concerns a girl prodigy who is educated by her father as if she were a son; he argues that women cannot be trusted with the education of girls because they will only perpetuate their own limitations, but the conservative mother claims that "you may as soon create a new World, as change a womans nature and disposition" (Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet). But in a play called The Female Academy "grave matrons" educate young women most seriously and intensively. I think this is the situation Lady Margaret wanted to see--women educating and supporting each other--but her observations of society gave her no confidence in it as a realistic possibility. As a consequence of this pessimism about social change, she turned more and more to fantasies, devising feminine utopias, new worlds in which women could become scholars, architects, generals, rulers, scientists, consciously indulging herself in whimsical dreams about never-never lands in which women would be free to do what they wished.

Her attitude toward marriage in relation to feminine achievement goes well beyond practical observations about the devotion of women's time and

energy to childbearing and household management. Her restless young heroines call marriage "the female slavery": for them, to marry means giving up liberty ~~to become~~ and becoming subordinate to another's needs and wishes. Though marriage is traditionally regarded as a symbol of life and fertility, in Margaret Cavendish's writings it symbolizes barrenness and death, equated with a grave monument beneath which women lie in anonymity. The single life, by way of contrast, represents the productivity of the mind, the opportunity to conceive and nurture children of the brain, the condition in which a woman can achieve fame and recognition. In a surprisingly modern analysis, she suggests that the very nature of marriage undermines the psychological independence necessary for achievement since it works against self-love, which she regards as the wellspring of ambition and productive work.

It is surprising how often observations of women of the past strike chords of sympathetic vibration today. Consider the matter of men forcing unwanted attentions upon women. Most women today find Clarissa's hysterical helplessness unconvincing as well as demeaning, but Fanny Burney, in a novel similar to Richardson's in many ways, has her heroine Evelina react in ways that women today recognize as real: irritation at a social code which requires her to be polite, anger at male presumptuousness, real fear of physical violence. And Margaret Cavendish shows us how men simply do not hear what women are saying to them, how a man can interpret a polite turndown as coquettishness and so proceed with his courtship until the woman tells him off in plain terms (which he still doesn't accept). In The Convent of Pleasure (Plays, 1668) she devises an antimasque of mad women: women haunted by fears of childbirth, despairing over children who have turned out badly, suffering from neglectful husbands, driven to flee because of importunate suitors. These are the experiences which women have long shared and which have created

community among us. Cavendish's tart observations of social behavior in the CCXI Sociable Letters and elsewhere give us many astute and amusing examples of an intelligent woman's perceptions of human behavior. She knows that in "Hymen's Market" women are the buyers, not the sellers, that women as well as men are motivated by sexual desire, that philandering husbands often inspire wives to philandering, that women exert more power than is realized by manipulating men without men knowing it. She sees men bullying women, but also being very silly, and she also knows that women can behave very badly. She abhorred the triviality of women's lives and the pettiness of character that often resulted. The fiction of an prolonged correspondence between women employed in the Sociable Letters and the Philosophical Letters indicates her desire for intellectual companionship among women. Alienated from the feminine world of domesticity (though she draws upon it sympathetically in various ways), she was also isolated in the world of men: she imagines herself attending the "Poets' Feast" and discovering herself the only woman in attendance. Consequently, she was very lonely, and her writings seem in part a substitute for the companionship she rarely found. She often speaks of the world she created for herself in her own mind, populated by the imaginary figures of her plays and stories, and some of her writings emerge literarily from dialogues she holds with herself. Her study of science may have been partly motivated by the frustrated desire to participate in the larger world, for by reading and writing in natural philosophy she could share in the most exciting and adventurous intellectual enterprise of her time. Science had not yet become a specialized activity marked off as an established academic area. On the contrary, educated men, such as the Duke of Newcastle and his brother and a great many others of Lady Margaret's class, speculated in the new learning, performed experiments, and

engaged in dialogue with philosophers such as Descartes and Hobbes (both friends of the Duke's).

While the inferior education that has been the common lot of women is often held responsible for inferior female achievement, the lack of conventional training can in some circumstances be an advantage. In the case of Margaret Cavendish, not having learned to think traditionally and not having had her mind amply furnished with received ideas freed her from some of the limitations of her male contemporaries. Anyone today reading in seventeenth century science is struck by the strange confusion of medieval notions and emerging modern insights; often what we can see as a breakthrough is being expressed or arrived at through an archaic and inappropriate vocabulary. But Margaret Cavendish didn't have the vocabulary to begin with. Thus her mind was especially receptive not only to new ideas but to new ways of thinking. Interestingly, her critiques of the theories of others often hinge upon their unclear use of language; nature, she thought, should not be discussed in metaphor (except by poets), and she dismissed theological reasoning and mystical approaches as inappropriate to the study of science. My tentative hypothesis is that her basic premise of a rational, self-moving matter is more compatible with modern concepts of matter than the ideas of many of her contemporaries of the second rank. (On the other hand, her ignorance of mathematics prevented her from comprehending contemporary mechanics; her real flair was for the biological sciences.) Yet no one has taken her scientific work seriously; modern scholars, rather than wade through her five lengthy volumes, have been content to accept the word of random commentators since the late 17th century that the Duchess of Newcastle was a silly, pretentious woman who knew next to nothing about science but could afford to indulge in vanity publication.

To conclude, I'd like to tell a little story involving my Cavendish research which illustrates the value of women's history. I was staying in a small hotel in London along with some American students on a foreign study program. On the day they completed final exams, the women in the next room invited me to share their celebration, and they asked me what I was doing in England. In the course of explaining, I read to them several stirring passages from Cavendish's play about a women's army, Bell in Campo (Plays, 1662). The general, Lady Victoria, addresses her troops in an astonishing, eloquent assertion--not defense, but assertion--of women's rights, from which I quote just a few brief lines:

> . . . wherefore now or never is the time to prove the courage of our Sex, to get liberty and freedom from the Female Slavery and to make ourselves equal with men; for shall Men only sit in Honours chair, and Women stand as waiters by? shall only Men in Triumphant Chariots ride and Women run as Captives by? shall only men be Conquerors, and women Slaves? shall only men live by Fame, and women dy in Oblivion?

> . . . but gallant Heroickesses, by this you may perceive we were as ignorant of ourselves as men were of us, thinking our selves shiftless, weak and unprofitable Creatures, but by our actions of War we have proved our selves to be every way equal with men, for what we want of strength, we have supplied by industry, and had we not done what we have done, we should have lived in ignorance and slavery.

As I read, the girls cheered. And when I read that final line, "had we not done what we have done, we would have remained in ignorance and slavery," I understood what women's history means: we today owe much to our remarkable female ancestors. Their stories will help our daughters and sons to create a freer and more humane future.

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Notes

[1]The question of predecessors in relation to women writers is discussed in Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Come Slowly--Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muses," Signs, 3 (1978), 572-87.

[2]There is a reliable recent biography: Douglas Grant, Margaret the First (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957). She published the following volumes (there are no unpublished works):

Poems and Fancies (London, 1653; 2nd ed. rev. 1664)

Philosophical Fancies (London, 1653)

The Philosophical and Physical Opinions (London, 1655)

The Worlds Olio (London, 1655; 2nd ed. 1671)

Natures Pictures (London, 1656; 2nd ed. 1671)

Plays (London, 1662)

Philosophical and Physical Opinions, rev. ed. (London, 1663)

CCXI Sociable Letters (London, 1664)

Philosophical Letters (London, 1664)

Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy To Which is Added, the Description of a New Blazing World. (London, 1666; 2nd ed. 1668; the Description reprinted separately in 1668).

The Life of . . . William Cavendish, Duke, Marquess, and Earl of Newcastle (London, 1667)

Playes, Never Before Printed (London, 1668)

Grounds of Natural Philosophy (London, 1668).

Only her biography of the Duke of Newcastle has appeared in modern editions, though the Scolars Press of Menston, England recently published facsimile editions of the CCXI Sociable Letters and Poems and Fancies, no longer

available. Short selections have occasionally appeared in anthologies, most recently in By A Woman Writt, ed. Joan Goulianos (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), pp. 55-68, and in The Female Spectator, ed. Mary R. Mahl and Helen Koon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 136-153. Her letters to her husband before their marriage have been published as Letters Written by Charles Lamb's "Princely Woman, the Thrice Noble Margaret Newcastle," ed. R. W. Goulding (London: Roxburghe Club, 1909) and in The Phanseys of William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle, addressed to Margaret Lucas, and her Letters in Reply, ed. Douglas Grant (London: Nonesuch, 1956).

[3]Several of her plays reflect these experiences, especially The Presence and The Sociable Companions in Plays Never Before Printed.

[4]The standard list includes 13 titles, but the 1663 edition of the Philosophical and Physical Opinions is a completely rewritten and much longer work elaborating a different basic theory of matter than the first edition, and therefore ought to be considered a separate work.

[5]In a preface to The Worlds Olio. Unfortunately this letter to the reader, atypical of Cavendish's attitudes about women, has been reprinted in By A Woman Writt with the editorial comment that "it reveals how deeply a woman could believe in the inferiority of women, and how powerfully she could express this belief" (p. 55). Later in her career her views are less equivocal than in this 1655 statement.